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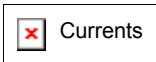
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- Front Page
- Local & Regional
 - Philadelphia & Suburbs
 - Montgomery County
 - Chester County
 - Bucks County
 - South Jersey
- US & World
- Sports
 - High School
- Business
- Daily Magazine
- Editorials & Commentary
 - Metro Commentary
 - South Jersey
- Commentary
 - Pennsylvania
- Community Voices
- Columnists
- Personal Finance & Investing
- Tech.life
- Health & Science
- Food & Dining
- Home & Design
- Weekend
- Arts & Entertainment
- Travel
- Sunday Neighbors
- Real Estate
- Education
 - School Report Card
- Religion
- Automotive
- Obituaries
- Photography
- Books
- Currents
- Image
- Special Reports

Search for

[Back to Home >](#)

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The Philadelphia Inquirer

Teaching empathy about poverty

Volunteers learn to relate before they share their money skills.

Kristin E. Holmes

is an Inquirer Staff Writer

In Lesson Two of the Just Neighbors social-justice curriculum, seminar participants pair up to balance the budget of a New Jersey family of seven living on \$1,800 a month.

Shirlyn Swann, a PNC Bank vice president, was part of a group that struggled with the assignment. Pay the gas bill, or buy school supplies for the children? Buy medicine for a sick baby, or pay the child-care bill this week?

"It kind of opened my eyes to how hard it was for families to live on a little bit of money," she said.

Swann's participation was helping her prepare for a new volunteer post to train homeless families in financial literacy. Just Neighbors enhanced her understanding of their plight.

The nine-lesson, interactive curriculum teaches about causes underlying poverty, such as low wages, job discrimination, and the shortage of affordable housing and child care.

The goal is to have volunteers not only provide services to families but also become policy advocates by writing letters, visiting legislators, even testifying before committees when pertinent bills arise.

The program is the work of Family Promise, formerly the National Interfaith Hospitality Network. The New Jersey-based nonprofit is a national network of 3,000 congregations and 90,000 volunteers who provide shelter, meals and support services to homeless families.

"The direct-service efforts are important, but we want people to understand the reasons that families are [housed temporarily] in our churches, synagogues and mosques in the first place," said Karen Olson, who founded what is now Family Promise in 1986.

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Olson and a team led by cocreators James Winans and Eric Kraft developed the curriculum over three years with the help of a \$450,000 grant from the Ford Foundation.

Just Neighbors, released in March, is being used in congregations, schools, colleges and community programs. So far, 100 kits, containing two videotapes and materials for exercises, are in use nationwide, Olson said. The kits cost \$150.

La Salle University, First United Methodist Church of Germantown, and Mount Airy Learning Tree are among the local groups using it.

The Northwest Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network, a local division of Family Promise and a provider of services to homeless families, began holding seminars in February, said Rachel Falkove, director of the Northwest group.

One participant was Mike Schultz, a teacher and community-service coordinator at Stern Hebrew High School in Somerton. Schultz now incorporates Just Neighbors into classes on community service, interweaving it with lessons on what Jewish law has to say about poverty.

Family Promise has begun collecting data to assess whether Just Neighbors is achieving its goal of spurring people to action and advocacy, Winans said.

"In my own tradition, it's the difference between principles of *gemilut hasidim* [Hebrew for 'acts of loving kindness'] and *tikkun olam* ['repairing the world']," Falkove said. "You can't repair the world if you don't understand what's broken."

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